

Iraqi Political Theology A stay with the Najaf marja'iyya

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Jihad al-Zein

Driving from the airport through Baghdad straight to Najaf, the first impression of the Iraqi capital after ten years of absence is that the city is tired, if not exhausted: the type of exhaustion that the person feels when its health finally gets better.

I

We entered Najaf with a mixture of peace and anxiety. Najaf is a special desert town, despite the proximity of the Euphrates along neighboring Kufa. Here, new roads are built, or started, new buildings are rising, sometimes interrupted. The city is bare by nature, geographically extensive though not a valley like Mecca, but, like Mecca, without trees in its old and recent streets and neighborhoods. All life in the city turns around the sepulcher of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Taleb, save some palm tree farms in its dry desert 'sea', as its largest neighborhood is called.

This neighborhood, indeed a neighborhood larger than the city itself, is the 'valley of peace', the largest cemetery on earth, which gets ever larger by the latest, relentless 'newcomers', so much so that Najafis say that wherever one digs in the city, layers of tombs are inevitably found, ever since the tomb of Imam 'Ali was discovered in the Abbasid period in that area of the desert, and the city turned into a religious place of learning since Shaykh al-Tusi at the end of the 'Abbasid caliphate. The city is a daily celebration of death, and the inhabitants are divided in two, the religious class with its different strata, and the merchant class, strong like the one in Mecca, all tied to the religious sites (to which should be added, depending on the times, the bureaucratic class, especially the security forces)... The Najafis have their own alluring habits. I had read the book of Balqis Sharara on her late father Muhammad citing one tradition: Najafis would not kill a snake living in their house. Her mother, who came from Jabal 'Amel in South had killed a snake in their house, and the neighbors had taken it badly. I asked Najafi friends about that habit, one of them still remembered that his grandfather would forbid the children from hurting the snake, arguing that 'the snake at home doesn't hurt'.

No doubt Najaf is prospering. 'Austerity' within prosperity, this is an odd combination for a religious city in the Orient, in form and substance one of the largest 'touristic' cities in the world next to Mecca, the Vatican, Madina and occupied Jerusalem. Najaf was always a world religious center, even when roads leading to it were forcibly closed in recent decades. The difference is that it is the first time in its history that it undergoes an experiment which makes its marja'iyya a 'political reference' for the state of Iraq after 2003. Even if it continues, and this is part of the

paradox, to remain fiercely independent. Indeed its higher marja' (scholar-reference) at present, and the higher marja' in the world, 'Ali Sistani, insists from an accepted position of authority on retaining the jurisprudential tradition of the Shi'i Twelvers in rejecting 'government money', any government, and underlines Najaf's independence even though he wields the strongest political authority in present-day Iraq. At the home of Sayyed Sistani you hear of a firm fatwa rejecting government money and salaries in the activities of the hawza (the collective school of the leading scholars and their students) in Iraq. You also hear that when some Bahraini Shi'is asked Sistani whether they could accept Bahraini governmental money and salaries for the Shi'i trust in Bahrain, he issued an unequivocal fatwa prohibiting it. The same answer came for proposals from the Iraqi government, where Shi'is rule in key positions within the new state of Iraq. Even in Qum, which has been in theory controlling the Iranian state directly since 1979, this independence of the hawza continues, despite the fact that the situation in Qum suggests that the state dominates Qum, and that the religious state, more precisely that the state led by religious men in power in Tehran dominate Qum more than the reverse. In that sense, the situation has become 'Sunni' in Iran, for the central state controls nowadays the 'religious center' by different means, because the marja's of Qum do not form part of state officialdom as their colleagues in Cairo's Azhar. This does not change the reality of the political hegemony of the Iranian state over its hawza, in the latter's expressed words or in its silence.

The case of Iraq is altogether different. The Najaf marja's, headed by Sayyed Sistani, say that they do not want a 'religious state', even less so a 'Shi'i state'. Instead, the marja'iyya insists on a plural civil society, as when it did upon the establishment of the constitution a few years ago. People close to Sayyed Sistani relate that one of the important American jurists who were helping Iraqi jurists and politicians in the formation of the Constitution at the time asked an Iraqi leader, who in turn asked the son of Sistani Sayyed Muhammad Rida, who is key in the Sistani environment, "how it is possible to write a general clause in the constitution which could in the future allow 'gay marriage' without mentioning the issue at present?" Those circles mention the instance without comment as an indication of some American thinking and its danger. To avoid such risks, the marja'iyya saw to it that the Constitution insist that any legislation not violate 'the established provisions of Islam' as part of its insistence on a non-religious state. Such 'provisions' are different from 'rules', for Islamic rules mean religious governance, whereas 'established provisions of Islam' mean the absence of contradiction with essential tenets of Islamic culture, in a general framework which is shared with other religions, like Christianity, Judaism, and even by some specific religious components of Iraq that cannot be found elsewhere.

In the narrow dusty streets which I walked from the hotel towards the house of Sayyed Sistani, tombs of old religious personalities were interspersed amongst houses with high walls. Public spaces around Imam Ali's mosque are expanding constantly, and the houses and parts of the old market are destroyed to make way. This does not go without protest from concerned inhabitants in a market place of the importance of Najaf where thousands of visitors form a constant stream and where real estate is at a premium. As soon as one crosses the esplanade, an old market with bookshops on both sides of the covered street provides modest displays with tables and shelves of religious books and translations from the West. I did not see, and I perhaps missed the presence of books in Persian or any other foreign language on these shelves. In one of

the alleys, sellers of grilled meet organized their sit-in next to tables full of books, in a popular scene of a timeless Islamic city if one misses the titles of some of the more contemporary books. We crossed a commercial street to find a steel barrier with security men guarding it. This is the alley in which the house of the supreme marja‘ stands. Despite its very popular aspect, with narrow doors and earthy walls, the place compels respect for the stream of high level Iraqi, Arab and foreign (except American) visitors, presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, ambassadors, all the delegations mix with the ordinary Najafis, all seeking a meeting with the Sayyed, which sometimes they get, sometimes not.

Less than twenty meters from the barrier in the alley, the security men open a small metal door we cross to a small meeting room full of people talking silently and reverentially because of the Sayyed’s proximity. The house itself is usual, extremely modest and clean like those great religious leaders, some of whom choose to be in government in their own countries.

II

The Saudi King ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, I was later told by one of the officials of the Islamic Supreme Council, was informed of the modest conditions in which the Shi‘ii marja‘ lives when he recently met the head of the Council Sayyed ‘Ammar al-Hakim. The King praised not only Sistani’s ‘wisdom’ and his ‘perceptive mind’ in matters Iraqi, but also his ‘modesty’ and ‘neglect for things material’, asking his guest to pass on his salutations.

We entered with the son of Sistani, Muhammad Rida, after waiting in the antechamber on the left of the house. The room was furnished with simple mattresses with some cushions set against walls. In the far right corner a medium height man with a long white beard, sitting next to a man with a turban, stood to greet us, I hurriedly tried to prevent him from standing, but I failed. After the greetings, he pointed to me a corner to his left. He was not the type to avoid looking straight in people’s eyes. Quite the contrary, and with a voice that matched his old age, in clear classical Arabic with Persian intonations, as if remnants of a long past time, he was saluting, speaking and sometimes asking questions.

It is not hard to hear from circles in the marja‘iyya heavy criticism and upset because of the degree of corruption reached in Iraq today. “It isn’t enough”, they say here, “that the Saddam Hussein era, especially after 1991, had turned corruption into a large social manifestation because of the difficult circumstances of Iraq, now the practice reveals the waste of vast sums of money. Under the previous regime, there were some protected sections of the middle class which enjoyed a comfortable life standard. Need has made them dependent on mediocre subsidies. Such was the case of teachers. Today, corruption is usual at all levels of the political and administrative pyramid... This makes us pessimistic about reform. The situation is intolerable.”

Talk about resources opens up the oil “file”. Here also the marja‘iyya circles insist on the promise of an oil future. Production this year remains at some 2 millions barrels per day. Next year it will reach 2.6 m b/d, approximately what it used to be in the past, and within two years, production could reach 4 m, more than the OPEC quota. Expectations are for 6 to 8 m b/d, and plans for 10 m b/d within a decade. This means

that Iraq will receive huge returns allowing the development of an infrastructure in need of massive investment. If the government is not corrupt.

In the house of the marja' Sayyed Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, also protected from the top of the street, I was impressed by his very realistic of the current situation in Iraq. Despite the immense political, securitarian and administrative problems plaguing Iraq, ultimately the country is like any other, and faces problems all countries face, including Western countries, he says. "We shall have to face these problems gradually, us and all the components of the Iraqi people", adds Hakim sitting on the floor mattress in the midst of several other scholars.

The Sistani circles insist on the close coordination between the four leading marja's in Najaf, they say 'it is necessary to avoid those who fish in troubled waters, as happens with politicians in Baghdad.' 'We send other marja's representatives to discuss important matters so that a united position emerges. It has happened often that we have changed our opinion, or taken measures because of their advice. This coordination is essential for us.'

It is true that the sources of the marja'iyya always insist that it keeps its distance from direct political work, or the involvement in the political life. "Politicians come to us in times of crisis like today: name for us a prime minister and we shall not hesitate to choose him for the job. They mention the name of Hussein Shahrastani, the current oil minister and member of Maliki's rule of law coalition as a candidate, thinking that he is close to the marja'iyya. We answer that we cannot name anyone, now or in the future. This is not our role. We only intervene in key issues of national life. I give you an example. We are the ones who prevented the extension of federalism on a Shi'i basis. You know that there was an idea for a Southern federal region, like the Kurdish region, in the whole South or in Basra and its surroundings. We rejected the idea, because sectarian federalism is dangerous and threatens Sunn-Shi'i relations We do not think there is a lasting problem between Sunnis and Shi'is, both are Arab. The real problem is the Iranian-Saudi tension and its effect on Iraq."

The Sistani circles believe in absolute in the national rattachment of Shi'is wherever they reside. The first attachment is to the country where they live, and this is also true in Iraq. Iraq is for all Iraqis, and national identity is the base in a democratic country where the legitimacy of government comes from elections. "We actually believe that the rapprochement between the various sects has become obsolete, they add. It is a deadend. What is needed is the creation of understanding and conviviality of the basis of citizenship and democracy... Iraq is an unseverable part of the Arab system, and is connected with the Palestinian issue. It was and will continue to operate on this basis. The vast majority, 80 pc, are Arab, Sunnis and Shi'is. Even in Najaf we ask from people to raise the pictures of late Arab personalities who have made their mark from the heart of Najaf and Iraq. Sometimes we intervene directly to prevent 'cursing' some of the Prophet's companions which extremists from outside Iraq bring to the scene. We shall continue to prevent them from doing so."

III

In 2009, the ministers of culture in Muslim countries chose Najaf to be the capital of Muslim culture in 2012, on the basis of the presence of Imam 'Ali's sepulcher. This is

both an occasion and a challenge. This is an Iraqi opportunity in the first place, which opens up many possibilities for the new Iraq and its political and cultural calling.

There is concern in some Najaf circles that the city may remain unprepared for the challenge, despite the effort to build hotels and congresses, including a large project undertaken by a UAE company, or at the organizational level in terms of the needed efforts for serious cultural events. The concern is strongly voiced in the house of Dr Muhammad Bahr al-'Ulum, who is particularly experienced following his openness to Western, Arab and Muslim capitals since his long exile in London. Even in the marja'iyya circles, there are questions about the ability of the government to deliver.

This is how I saw Iraq, less tense than in recent years, especially the brutish two years in 2005-2006. Between Najaf and Baghdad the streets and avenues remain full of security presence at checkpoints which the Iraqis call 'points of control'. The few hours I had in Baghdad on the way back revealed long concrete walls which hide large neighborhoods from each another, sometimes the demarcation of civil war, sometimes protecting streets where officials live. A trip to the large quarter of Karrada and the famed Abu Nuwas street on Friday evening showed many Baghdadis in Tigris cafés, even as the streets were chuck full of cars and 'points of control'.

Jihad Zein is the op-ed and diplomatic editor of *an-Nahar*. He was the guest of the Najaf marja'iyya in early June.